

# A VOICE *for Reservists*

**Story and Photos by Beth Reece**

**I**F voicing problems is half the struggle of solving them, the U.S. Army Reserve Command is deep in battle. Its recent adoption of the Army Family Action Plan gives Reservists the chance to both express their concerns and search for solutions.

Started as an active-Army program, AFAP has helped service members achieve such successes as a \$150,000 increase in Service Members' Group Life Insurance and the birth of Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers.

"AFAP is about changing laws and regulations to make the Army a better life," said Betty Smith, USARC's AFAP program manager.

More than 100 Reserve-affiliated delegates met for USARC's first AFAP conference this summer to analyze 69 issues that Reservists identified as paramount to individual, unit and family well being. Categories included force support; mobilization; family programs; medical and dental benefits; retirement; entitlements; the Military Technician Program and the



**Zaida Prieto, a family member from the 65th Regional Support Command in Puerto Rico, outlines soldiers problems with TRICARE.**

Active Guard/Reserve Program.

Problems affecting USARC units and families differ considerably from those of active-duty soldiers, who generally have easy access to military installations and support services, Smith said. But embracing the AFAP grants Reservists the same voice as their active-duty counterparts in getting those issues resolved.

"Our voice just wasn't being heard through the active-duty AFAP. Out of 100 issues, only about three of those would be important to us," she said. "People tend to forget about Reservists, but they're a unique group of people with a unique set of concerns."

Frequent deployments have made increasing demands on Reservists and altogether altered the lifestyle of some soldiers and families, who often bear lengthy separations from loved ones, Smith said. Many Reservists encounter such financial hardships as unexpected expenses or loss of income, while others encounter conflicts with their civilian employers. And on top of the constant turnover rate, 13,000 Reservists have been deployed in the past four years.

"But this is going to be the business for us. We're still very much committed," USARC chief MG Thomas J. Plewes told delegates during the conference. "If the Army is going to go, it's not going without the Army Reserve."

Benefits and money were clearly Reservists' biggest concerns over the past year, with twice the number of issues raised in benefits and entitlements than in any other category. Reservists sought an increase to survivor benefits, a redefinition of veterans' qualifications, a Basic Allowance for Housing equal to that of active-duty soldiers, the elimination of current travel restrictions for Space "A" travel and the option to transfer Montgomery GI Bill benefits to family members.

Even the force support and mobilization categories included issues that

involved pay, with recommendations to senior leaders for a mileage and lodging reimbursement for drilling Reservists, a child-care allowance and a Reservist-mobilization allowance.

Money, said USARC CSM Alex Ray Lackey, will remain to be soldiers' prevailing issue.

"One day I drove by a gas station with a sign that said '\$10 an hour plus full college benefits.' Some of our soldiers don't get that much, and we've even got soldiers who are on food stamps," he said. "We pay

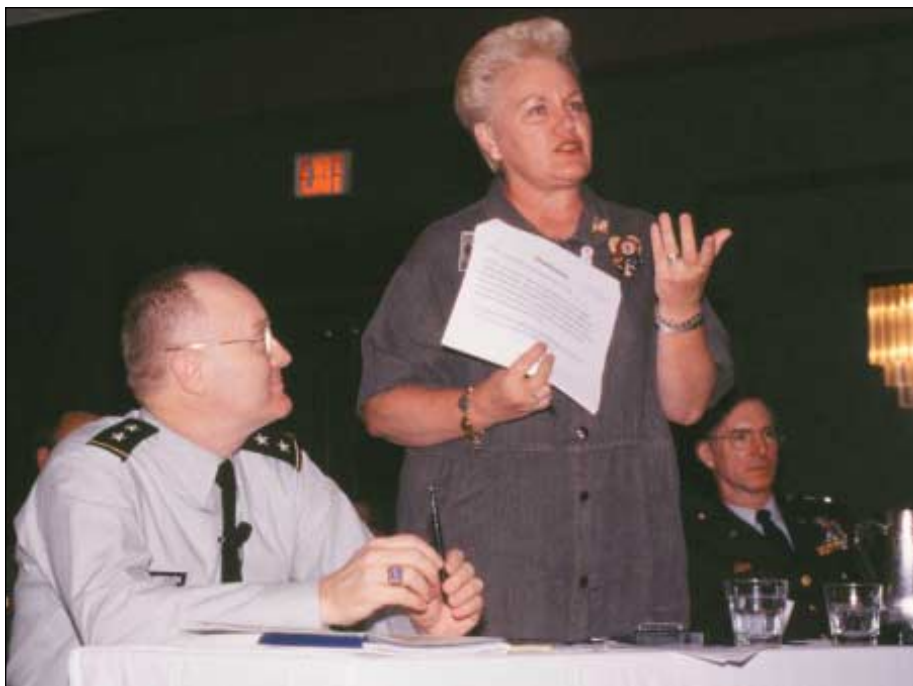
officers to go to school. We need to start paying enlisted people, too. It's not about money; it's about doing the right thing. Pay is the bottom line."

Other issues that delegates chose as vital to morale and readiness included the access to current information on primary-care managers in remote locations, funding for the hiring of permanent Real-Time Automated Personnel Identification System (RAPIDS) clerks, commander responsibility for family readiness programs, the employment conditions of military technicians and physical-fitness opportunities for soldiers stationed at remote sites.

Most of the delegates were volunteers whose status as regular Reservists, Active Guard/Reserve soldiers or family members lent an objective perspective to their particular work groups.

MAJ Shiela L. Harvin, a delegate from the 5th Brigade, 87th Training Division, at Fort Jackson, S.C., said she understands that missions affect both soldiers and their families, and that the support a family gets from the unit influences the soldiers' commitment and contentment.

"We have to make families a viable part of the Army Reserve," said Harvin, who has participated in the AFAP since her time as an active-duty



**Susan Bambrough, wife of U.S. Army Reserve deputy commanding general MG Craig Bambrough (looking on), poses a question pertaining to an issue raised in the family issues category.**



**SSG Joanne Johnston of the 99th Reg. Spt. Cmd. in Oakdale, Pa., explains that TRICARE customers are not receiving accurate information about providers.**



*“That’s what the Army is all about — helping people. That’s what the AFAP is about, too.”*

company commander. “If we can’t meet the family’s needs, then we can’t expect the soldier to be a part of the Army.”

MAJ Lilla Hashemi, from the 6252nd U.S. Army Hospital in Ventura, Calif., said she volunteered because she wanted to share her insight of how Reservists and their families face difficulties and challenges.

“As a mental-health provider, I know that when soldiers leave for a deployment, they’re concerned about the family, job and financial situation that they leave behind. We need to be able to make them feel sure that their families are in good hands so they can serve their country with ease and peace of mind.”

Hashemi said she contributed to the AFAP in hopes of finding solutions to Reservists’ biggest concerns. Her participation mirrors her persuasion to be an Army Reservist, she said.

“This country has done so much for me. It has helped me become what I am, so I wanted to do something in return. That’s what the Army is all about — helping people. That’s what the AFAP is about, too.” □



**U.S. Army Reserve Command deputy commanding general MG Craig Bambrough considers the recommendations made for various issues.**



**MAJ Lilla Hashemi, from the 6252nd U.S. Army Hospital in Ventura, Calif., discusses Reservists’ roles as casualty-assistance officers.**

## Top Five Issues

**M**ILEAGE and lodging reimbursement for drilling Reservists, survivor benefits, transfer options for the Montgomery GI Bill, redefinition of veterans’ qualifications and TRICARE for gray-area retirees were the top five issues covered during the Dallas conference.

“I find the choice of these issues to be very interesting,” USARC deputy commanding general MG Craig Bambrough told delegates, vowing that they would receive leadership’s immediate attention. “Probably very few people in this room will benefit from the solution of some of these issues. I give you all a lot of credit for taking the long-term view.”

☀ Reimbursement of mileage and lodging was important to soldiers drilling outside of the reasonable commuting distance outlined by the Joint Travel Regulations. Reservists are presently forced to pay out-of-pocket expenses for travel and board, which often exceed drill pay. Delegates recommended that drilling Reservists be reimbursed for traveling outside of the commuting distance outlined in the JTR, so long as Reservists cannot drill locally in their current grade and military occupational specialty.

☀ Current Department of Defense policy on the Survivor Benefit Plan says surviving spouses face decreasing benefits upon reaching the age of 62, when the percentage drops from 55 percent to 35 percent of the soldier’s retirement pay or base amount. Delegates asked for the policy to be rewritten so that benefits are not reduced.

☀ Reservists also said that MGIB benefits are not useful to Reservists who already have degrees or work in jobs that don’t permit time for education. Delegates recommended the approval to transfer MGIB benefits to spouses or dependent children or a combination of the two, as well as the lifting of time restrictions so long as the soldier is in the Selected Reserve Program.

☀ The redefinition of veterans’ qualifications was a major concern for all delegates. USARC soldiers are eligible for many veterans’ benefits upon completing at least 181 consecutive days of active-duty service and an honorable discharge, but USARC deployments generally last 179 days or less. Delegates suggested changing veterans’ eligibility to one of the following: completion of 178 consecutive days of active-duty service, the accumulation of 200 days of active service within a one-year period, deployment to a hostile-fire zone or upon the issuance of a 20-year letter.

☀ Delegates also recommended that Title 10 of the U.S. Code be amended to authorize TRICARE benefits to gray-area retirees, who are not eligible for TRICARE between retirement and the age of 60.

Issues that delegates chose not to address during the conference have been returned to the units with the work group’s recommendation for resolution at a lower level. — *Beth Reece*